

# Camelot (Not): JFK's Misunderstood Legacy

*Kennedy Influenced the Kid from Hope—but Not How You Think*

Post 11/15/92  
By Michael R. Beschloss

**N**O SOONER were the ballots counted than pundits—and eminent Democrats—began declaring Bill Clinton a reincarnation of John F. Kennedy who would usher in a restoration of Camelot.

This was inevitable. For most of us, the snowbound inaugural of January 1961 is our only unambiguously happy memory of a Democrat assuming the

*Michael Beschloss is author of "The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963" and (with Strobe Talbott) of "At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War," to be published by Little, Brown in February.*

presidency. Furthermore, the connection between Kennedy and Clinton was graven upon the American mind this year by never-before-shown footage of the 35th president greeting the 16-year-old Arkansan in the Rose Garden of the White House, as if anointing his distant successor.

Now that the election is over, the more instructive aspect of the JFK-Clinton connection is how the young man was affected by his boyhood hero—and what the Kennedy experience can teach us about what to expect of our 42nd president.

Clinton first became seriously aware of JFK in July 1956, just before his 10th birthday in Hot Springs, Ark. Having bought their first television, Virginia and Roger Clinton turned on coverage of the Democratic convention in Chicago.

Fascinated, the young Clinton saw the 39-year-old Kennedy narrowly lose the vice presidential nomination in a contest against the two senators from Tennessee, Estes Kefauver and Albert Gore Sr. (whose namesake son Clinton selected for the post). As a ninth-grader in the fall of 1960, Clinton was one of few Hot Springs High School students to support Kennedy and was thrilled when JFK entered the White House after carrying Arkansas's eight electoral votes.

During his thousand days, Kennedy paid lavish attention to Arkansas, making him especially present in the newspapers that Clinton read so avidly. Kennedy visited Arkansas twice, including a visit one month before his murder, to dedicate the Greers Ferry Dam. Kennedy's attentiveness was due in large part to the Arkan-

See CAMELOT, C4, Col. 1

## CAMELOT, From C1

sas congressional delegation, which included Kennedy's old Senate colleagues J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and John McClellan, with whom Kennedy had investigated labor rackets, as well as the omnipotent chairman Wilbur Mills of the House Ways and Means Committee.

**I**t was on Wednesday morning, July 24, 1963, that Kennedy walked into the Rose Garden and greeted the American Legion's "Boys Nation" group that included the young Bill Clinton. Although he concealed it, the president was in ill humor. He had just spent breakfast fending off attacks from four members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who were irate about the nuclear test ban treaty that Kennedy's negotiators were completing in Moscow. With more prescience than he realized, the president welcomed Clinton and his peers by saying, "No group could be more appropriately visiting here now. We want you to feel very much at home."

After this trip, Clinton spoke to his mother of devoting his life to public service, marveling that someone of his age and background could be so fortunate as to meet the president. This instinct was only enhanced by the emotional impact of Kennedy's assassination four months later. Kennedy's Catholicism, his absorption in international affairs and an old Kennedy family relationship with Georgetown University were influences on Clinton's decision to matriculate there in September 1964.

That fall, JFK worship was so strong, especially at Georgetown, that one of Clinton's classmates began taking afternoon naps after hearing that this was what his hero had done. Moved by Kennedy's rhetoric and his oft-stated commitment to "excellence," Clinton pored over Kennedy-era memoirs when they were published. By the spring of 1965, when Sen. Robert Kennedy came to speak at Georgetown with two of his children in tow, Clinton was president of his class and served as his escort.

The Kennedy who arguably made the more profound impression upon Clinton was Robert. Clinton was taken with RFK's opposition to the Vietnam War and his passion for social justice. It was far more in the manner of Robert Kennedy than his elder brother that after the riots following Martin Luther King's murder in 1968, Clinton pasted a red cross on each side of his white Buick and raced food to Washingtonians huddled in church basements. In the fall of 1991, Clinton returned to Georgetown University and read RFK's statement that each time citizens stand up for an ideal they send forth a tiny ripple of hope. Clinton asked the audience "how long it's been since you heard an American president say and believe these things."

As a presidential candidate in 1992, Clinton had no particular need or desire to fabricate an image. He knew that there was no premium for a candidate who seemed to wrap himself in John Kennedy's toga. In 1984, Gary Hart was so needed for aping JFK's language and mannerisms that one of his aides wrote in an internal memo, "Gary over-evokes the JFK image. People resent it because Gary does not seem authentic." Although his audiences prob-

ably did, Michael Dukakis never tired of comparing himself to the earlier Democratic nominee from Boston who had chosen a Texas running mate.

Last spring, Clinton cited Kennedy's Peace Corps in defense of his own plan to establish a national service trust fund that would finance college educations in exchange for a promise to serve the country. On MTV in June, he recalled that in the 1960s "we believed that politics was something that was good" and "that things like the Peace Corps, which Kennedy started, made you a better person . . . . A lot of the things that Kennedy proposed connected people my age to the government."

At the Democratic convention, Clinton's handlers did not mind suggesting subtle parallels with JFK—the surprise post-nomination appearance in the hall, the film of the Rose Garden handshake. During the fall campaign, references to the victor of 1960 were more subliminal—the hoarse candidate insisting, "We can do better," and that "we get America moving again." Just before the election, Clinton recalled JFK's statement at the end of the 1960 campaign that the "mystery of democracy" was about to reexpress itself.

Just as scholars in 1960 used the FDR experience to foresee how Kennedy would perform in the White House, the Kennedy experience offers us clues about the Clinton presidency. Clinton comes to the White House more committed, better informed, more programmatic and more intellectually absorbed by issues than Kennedy was in November 1960. (In his effort to compare Clinton to Kennedy, JFK's close aide Theodore Sorensen wrote recently that Kennedy too submitted "bold new programs" to Congress in early 1961, which may be a rare example of the use of an incoming president to elevate the reputation of the past one.)

After a largely indifferent 14 years in Congress, Kennedy was thought by none of his peers to be a commanding Senate leader; few would have called him a "policy wonk." Clinton's fellow governors voted him the most effective in the country. Like Kennedy, Clinton arrives at a moment of national hope and good feeling. He will be able to call on the kind of emotional support from American youth that Kennedy generated.

Concerned like Kennedy that as a new arrival on the world scene he might unsettle leaders on Wall Street and in allied capitals, Clinton might be tempted to appoint establishment figures who may not share his ultimate purposes; as with JFK's periodic annoyance with the orthodoxy of his secretary of state Dean Rusk, Clinton may come to regret it.

Clinton will not be hamstrung by the hairbreadth national majority and the Republican-Southern Democrat coalition in Congress that obstructed Kennedy. But Kennedy had the advantage of having a Senate leader, Mike Mansfield, who was inclined to defer to the president.

By contrast, Clinton faces Democratic leaders in the House and Senate who, although at least outwardly delighted by his victory, have grown accustomed to leading their party singlehandedly from Capitol Hill, as well as restless interest groups more numerous, diverse and better organized than in the early 1960s. He will benefit from skills at brokerage and persuasion that, if the decade in Little Rock gives any indication, resemble not Kennedy's gentlemanly diffidence but the zestful horse-trading and consensus-building of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson that yielded such impressive results.

Of New Frontier Washington, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote in "A Thousand Days" that a city "somnolent in the Eisenhower years had come suddenly alive . . . . There was the ex-

citement which comes from . . . the release of energy which occurs when men with ideas have a chance to put them into practice." We can expect Clinton to bring to Washington the same passion for excellence, the arts and public service that JFK did, but with one wrinkle: Insecure in his origins, Kennedy was inclined to surround himself socially with the rich and wellborn, encouraging a kind of royal court. Clinton should prove to be far more inclusive.

A cardinal problem that the two presidents share is that of dampening expectations. There was so much talk during the 1960 campaign about a "100 Days" that would rival FDR's in 1933 that Kennedy had Sorensen include in his inaugural address a warning that "all this will not be finished in the first 100 days, nor in the first 1,000 days . . . nor even in our lifetime on this planet." This was wise: The failed Bay of Pigs invasion—which so impaired Kennedy's presidency—was launched on his 87th day in office.

Clinton confronts a Congress, press and public who will not be as patient as they might have been in 1960. Within a very short time, he must fulfill promises to stimulate the economy, provide health care, reduce the deficit. He will have to deal with international crises that have been simmering during the past half-year. He will have to make military and foreign policy choices more basic and difficult than those facing any president since Truman—and sell them to the public.

One may endorse the notion that JFK had an important impact on Bill Clinton and that his record foreshadows important aspects of the next administration without compelling the new president to be measured against the nostalgic memories of a lost prince. As John F. Kennedy's first two Democratic successors lamentably discovered, the cost of running against a legend can be very high.